

Texas base has landed the headquarters of the Air Force's new cyberspace unit -- another blow to local hopes for Offutt Air Force Base south of Omaha.

The Pentagon announced Friday that the headquarters of the new 24th Air Force would go to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, pending a final environmental review.

Offutt had been one of the six finalists for the unit, which Pentagon spokesmen have said would bring with it about 400 military and civilian jobs.

Offutt had also been one of six finalists for the Air Forces' new Global Strike Command, which went instead to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana.

The Nebraska delegation and other officials were particularly incensed at that Pentagon decision because, Sen. Ben Nelson said, Offutt outscored Barksdale and all four other contenders on the selection criteria.

And Nebraska's delegation had pushed Offutt as the best site for a new multibranch cyberwarfare unit that instead will be based near Washington, at Fort Meade, Md.

When that decision was announced earlier this month, Nelson called it "sort of a Washington power grab."

Regarding the decision on the 24th Air Force headquarters, Nelson said Friday that he assumed "they would make sure this time that the criteria matched the decision. After the Global Strike Command fiasco, the processes used for these decisions have little credibility."

"Today's decision is another reflection of the politics within the Air Force," said Nelson, a Democrat. "The truth of the matter is that Air Force officials view Offutt Air Force Base as primarily the home of United States Strategic Command, a unified command."

Unified commands include staff contingents and top generals from all the services involved.

While Air Force leaders maintain the 55th Wing at Offutt, Nelson said, "Their priorities are enriching Air Force bases that primarily support Air Force operations.

"Unified commands, meanwhile, are viewed as something that can 'fend for themselves.'

"We have a strong relationship with the Air Force personnel that are located here at Offutt," Nelson said, "but we need to expand those relationships to the Air Force leadership nationally."

On Friday, Pentagon officials said selection criteria for the 24th Air Force headquarters included mission synergy, proximity to other cyber units, access to scientific and technical expertise, communication and bandwidth capabilities.

In a statement, Kathleen Ferguson, deputy secretary of the Air Force for installations, said the base selection was made "using a measured and deliberate process to ensure that the final decision is the best possible outcome for national defense."

Rep. Lee Terry called that decision "disappointing but expected."

When Pentagon officials sat down with congressional delegations to explain the decision favoring Barksdale for the Global Strike Command, Terry said, the Nebraska delegation asked about cyberspace command.

"While they didn't come right out and say it wasn't Offutt, they said that in the scoring there was one clear favorite," said Terry, a Republican whose district includes Offutt.

"Reading between the lines, they were telling us it was not going to be Offutt."

He received a courtesy call Thursday night about the decision, Terry said, and the Pentagon official briefly explained there was "more synergy at Lackland than at Offutt, and that was the difference."

Terry said he didn't have a copy of Offutt's site evaluation scores yet. But he said there will be a briefing next week. Pentagon officials will go up to Capitol Hill and talk to the congressional delegations of the states that had finalists.

The other finalists were Barksdale; Langley Air Force Base, Va.; Peterson Air Force Base, Colo.; and Scott Air Force Base, Ill.

The 24th Air Force has been forming for nearly two years since it was first proposed as the Air Force Cyberspace Command. Spokesmen have described its mission as coordinating computer network defense and offensive attacks on enemy networks.

